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CHARACTER

BY EDWARD A. THURBER

IN his talk at the assembly, he told the students that a good many of them ought not to be in college at all; they should be clerking or something like that. He enlarged upon these observations and then declared that they were hardly worth making, as the wrong persons always took them to heart. So far the boards were clear; he could begin all over again. The students that counted, he went on, were not likely to be very prominent. At this point, I was sorry I did not know the football captain; I should have liked to scrutinize his face. Perhaps he wasn't there; in fact, as attendance was voluntary, his absence was foregone, as was that of the editor of the college paper, or any of the prominent students unless it were the president of the Y. M. C. A. His address after that was devoted to those who were not at that time prominent but who were destined to be in after life, most of whom, I assume, were present.

The main portion of his talk was about character and character building. Now, of course, the attainment of character is the chief endeavor in life, the one thing desirable. It is, however, most difficult; the roads and the valleys thereof are likely to be strewn with much that is distressing, much that is horrible, an aggregation of bones, dry bones. Yet at all costs character must be had and the best way to capture it is to follow the beckoning of that stern law-giver, duty. Thus he proceeded, or perhaps a little better than this; he was speaking *extempore* and his argument was delayed in gladsome interludes. He maintained, or else I was dreaming, that character was more important than getting lessons; he played, as it were, right into the hands of the football captain. And so I became reconciled to the latter's absence. And then I think I must have fallen asleep.

In any case I was aware no longer of a speaker, but simply of a far off rippling, splashing, like the cadences of water. The words

carried no distinctness, and yet it was as if they were a continuation of something of which my mind had been a part. We had met and blended and then diverged. The same interests no longer invited us, yet my mental current was floating particles of that contact, and, strangely enough, I felt as if those particles were impure; my own stream would have to go until sundown before it could become clear again.

The two most woeful experiences we are called upon to undergo are the hearing of sermons and the acquiring of character. Not that sermons may not be delightful and character admirable—I wish to engage in no quarrel. I am simply propounding a condition of woe.

“A new commandment,” said the smiling Muse,
“I give my darling son, Thou shalt not preach”;—
Luther, Fox, Behmen, Swedenborg, grew pale,
And, on the instant, rosier clouds upbore
Hafiz and Shakspeare with their shining choirs.

Now I hold no brief for the paleness of Luther, Fox and the other worthies, yet I think they might well have grown pale; not that they were always preaching, but because they were so constituted that they were forever tempted to preach; that yawning chasm never ceased to confront them. One of them, in his agony or might, threw an ink bottle—at, we hope, the tempter of sermons. For no better conceivable use could be made of ink bottles; if, for instance, Zarathustra or Jonathan Edwards or Thomas Paine had possessed a bucketful of them and knew their curves, they would have delighted us more by pure vision and tortured us less by a corrupt habit of sermonizing.

A history of the origins, growth and sovereignty of sermons would be instructive; I greatly fear, however, that such a study will never be undertaken with any thoroughness. We necessarily know so little of the mental processes that long ago arrested those men apes when they were eating their first apples—when purity that had no opposite became festered with a conscience, when—but that was a tragic time; it may be well that its catastrophes are holden from us. Yet I wonder if what those ancestors went through may not be from time to time reëxperienced—in races, in children—and my wonder rises to a certainty whenever I see

the little less and the little more crowding from their centres. Then hypocrisy and prejudice steal over to the side of virtues; duty and character touch hands with sin; then also sermons and religion gaze at one another from afar.

There was a nation once (perhaps it exists still) which has been characterized by an astute observer as "this petty, unsuccessful unamiable people, without politics, without science, without art, without charm." And yet, in spite of the strictures which I have quoted, the writer is springing to the defense of this nation. They deserve a great place in the world's regard, he says, and are likely to have it greater, as time goes on, rather than less. I shall not give the steps by which he comes to his conclusions but shall quote a phrase or two that this nation got down in books:—"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." "In the way of righteousness is life, and in the pathway thereof there is no death." "The righteous shall see it and rejoice, and all iniquity shall stop her mouth." "As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more, but the righteous is an everlasting foundation."

"All, or very nearly all, the nations of mankind," says Matthew Arnold, "have recognized the importance of conduct, and have attributed to it a natural obligation. They, however, looked at conduct not as something full of happiness and joy, but as something one could not manage to do without." Of this nation, he avers, happiness is its being's end and aim "and no one has ever come near Israel in feeling and in making others feel that to *righteousness belongs happiness*." Yes, these were the days of Israel's innocence; it was the period before she had eaten apples and the experiences she had gone through had left in her no doubts. She didn't preach; she made statements; she rejoiced. When her experiences became more complex and rich and direful, then she began to have her misgivings, to drone agedly of conduct and duty. Sermons, as I have said, entail a condition of woe. But I think that I have spoken enough about them.

There is a number of things like virtue, duty, character, which seem at first sight to stand for the bloom of excellence but which, when they are tried out, are found to be like fruit grown upon waste soil—most bitter. They are spoken of thoughtlessly as

positive, absolute things whereas their very essence is indirect, relative and often a negation. They are entirely different from "human nature," for instance, or "personality," which actually do stand for something positive and luminous. The first set is easy and therefore cultivated; the second set is innate and rare.

When a dog does something like a dog, when he exhibits one of those characteristics which dogs exhibit, we say "how human!" and this is the highest compliment we can pay a dog. But let us come to close quarters with character, and as literature bears so many gifts to life, I shall take my first illustrations from literature.

In his *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes some very wicked and companionable and radiant personalities who are without shame and without character. I forbear to mention them. He also describes people like the parish priest and the plowman who are rather more abstract than human: they are types; they are sermons; they abound in character. He describes other people, the knight, for instance, and the prioress. Now the most interesting thing in life to Chaucer is life itself; and therefore, when he is in his best vein, he is not careful to register what he approves of and of what he disapproves. These are matters quite secondary to life. He is not always in his best vein. You know very well, for instance, that he approves of the knight. Here is a man worthy and gentle, meek, brave; he is all those things which a good knight should be. Far less a type than the plowman, the knight nevertheless lacks definiteness; he does not stand out luminously; he is, indeed, a bit of a figure-head. Chaucer is apparently more interested in depicting a vivid ideal than he is in describing a living individual.

It is quite otherwise with the prioress. Here is a lady luxuriating in the blessed contradictions of human nature. She is unquestionably religious and rather worldly. She is dignified, affable, self-conscious, sentimental, dainty, and is possessed of great charm. Foibles she has in abundance, affectations, poses.

But there is another woman whom Chaucer partly describes and partly puts into action, and it may be, one cannot be sure, that her character would suffer in comparison with that of the prioress. Sweetness and light are not wholly in her style. "Ex-

perience," she said, "is good enough for me; I have known my world in my day." The wife of Bath craves experience, life, and accordingly she is the most actual person in Chaucer; she stands for the shrine at which he worships. If one could imagine Shakespeare as having been becalmed at sea in a supposititious voyage with the Pilgrim Fathers, what a boon he would have found in the wife of Bath!

The principles that govern art are absolute principles; they apply equally well to life—they are life's mirror. And they are useful in that they are fairly patent and discoverable. You try to characterize Agnes, for instance, that perfect woman; but you have never seen Agnes—you don't know her: what's worse, you have no notion what a perfect woman is. You do happen to know all about Dora, poor futile Dora, and if you have the artist's instinct, you can put her down, and all the people will exclaim "How human! how charming!" simply because she is alive, and they will say of Agnes, "O, she's so stupid, so good!" simply because she is dead. If you should try to characterize God, what a fizzle you would make of it, and for the very same reason that you made a fiasco of Agnes. You would be dealing with someone that you didn't know. But if you should try to characterize the devil, you might succeed very well indeed; there is a person you might have experienced. Why labor the question further? Dickens didn't know Agnes, nor did Milton know God; they knew Dora and Lucifer.

But another condition surrounds these creatures of art. A writer cannot say to himself with any assurance—"Go to now, I will depict so and so—him I know all about; but this other one I will let alone—she is quite out of my line"—a writer cannot say this with any assurance because he doesn't know what or whom he knows. With what certainty could Hawthorne have maintained that he knew Clifford Pyncheon; or Shakespeare, Caliban! They might have called to these creatures ever so loudly, but they would not have come. An artist may fail in the very thing wherein he thought he was certain of success and he may succeed where he thought failure was immanent. It is true enough, as Milton says, that the life of a poet should be a poem, but who knows what a poem life is? If Milton knew it

for Milton, he knew it for nobody else, and one might strive until doomsday to lead a Miltonic, a poet's life, and yet thwart his brightest instincts, strangle all the humanity out of himself.

This sonata, then, which may be so fine, this characterization which is so real, these are mirrors in which their creators are reflected. They are fruits of artistic skill and are striven for, but more essentially they are products of lives. They cannot be created by taking thought; thought will embellish them; they lie deep in personality; the life of a poet must be a poem—it can be nothing else. Dickens and Hawthorne had lived the lives of Dora and Clifford Pyncheon over and over again and knew all about them. And whenever these and other artists failed, their failures came from a lack of experiencing what they were putting down; their lives were at that moment unpoetic.

Yet while form-giving is a condition of art, a particular form is not a thing innate; it is a discovery—at times, indeed, so happy a discovery that it seems as if certain ideas took inevitably certain forms. An architect plans a building, and he is so felicitous in his choice of form that his successors imitate him; they improve upon him; eventually they evolve something which they call perfect—a Greek temple. This perfection, however, is but relative; other temple builders appear among a different people in later times, and if they should try to express themselves in Greek temples, their art would become limited, alien and ineffectual. A form therefore is artificial; it is subject to a restless change. Character is akin to form with this difference—a form really has to be striven for; character is conditioned more absolutely upon something higher up—it is a by-product. And that is why talks on character are so painful, and character building itself so vexatious and dreary.

“Full of principle,” said Huckleberry Finn of Tom Sawyer. Huck had no principles, no fountain of reason, no method of drawing conclusions; he simply possessed a more abundant life than Tom. And the words “abundant life” remind one that this is perhaps the finest claim of religion, and it seems to be akin to the old assertion of Israel, that to righteousness belongs happiness. And, curiously enough again, it is from moral and religious people that we are most afflicted by sermons

on character, mouthings upon this by-product. Why should this be so?

Perhaps the readiest answer to the question is that, as human beings, we are rather fond of sermons and character building; they come natural and easy and follow the line of least resistance. It is easier to talk and to dream than it is to think, especially if our talk is directed toward making other people toe a mark, and our dreams toward what we call ideals. It is easier to write about a perfect knight than it is to create an actual wife of Bath, less profound to assume a Miltonic God than it is to fashion a Miltonic devil. Thus we fold our hands in sleep.

And yet this is not the whole story. Although we are fond of sleep, in our hearts we like wakeful moments better; we like best two things, joy and life, unless, indeed, these be one and the same thing, life abundant, happiness. But these are so difficult to attain, so impossible, as it were, to most of us, that we pitch upon an easy thing like character and try to attain that in a difficult way so that it will not appear easy. When the horse in the Book of Job was swallowing the ground with fierceness and rage and saying among the trumpets Ha! ha! he was very human and was doing difficult things. When the Puritans founded a theocratic state, they were doing something which was rather simple and easy, but they saw to it, most humanly, that it appeared difficult. And in thus soothing themselves, they gained a spectral joy. What they never attained was life.

But the case against the Puritans is too popular and worn; it can be overurged; in the pursuit of it one would be horrified to find oneself breaking a lance with Don Quixote and the angels. Sermons, that Puritan stronghold, as I have said, may be delightful; not, however, when they teach morals and character; then they are just sermons. Character building cannot be more important, even to a football captain, than getting a lesson, for getting a lesson is conceivably of positive value whereas morals and character can shift for themselves; provided, of course,—but here I shall let the discussion rest.

Ulysses slept in Circe's palace, but he suffered no enchantment; he enchanted Circe.

EDWARD A. THURBER.